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Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations

Letter dated 13 May 2005 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit the statement of H.E. Seyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, addressed to the Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization headquarters in Paris on 5 April 2005 (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the sixtieth session of the General Assembly, under item 44 of the preliminary list.

(*Signed*) M. Javad **Zarif**

* A/60/50 and Corr.1.

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Annex to the letter dated 13 May 2005 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran addressed to the Secretary-General

Statement by His Excellency Seyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Before the Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Paris, April 5, 2005

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

On the last overseas visit during my eight year tenure as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it gives me delight to be hosted by UNESCO, the intellectual watch tower of the United Nations. The preamble of the constitution of this home base of educational, scientific and cultural activity states:

"since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed; ... ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war; ... a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must there-fore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."

This quoted passage sums up the gist of my proposal to the international community for the advancement of dialogue among civilizations. Hence the choice of this organization on my last visit abroad is justified by a convergence in our aims and objectives. Before starting my discussion of the topic at hand, I would like to seize the moment and thank H.E. Mr. Director General of UNESCO, who so kindly offered me this opportunity.

Within the UN family, UNESCO has been the leading agency in the advancement of dialogue among civilizations, and it has over the course of the past few years held several significant gatherings on this topic with the support of its member countries all over the globe.

In the meantime, UNESCO has addressed two other important issues that on a conceptual level are deeply linked to dialogue among civilizations. One has been the ratification in 2003 of the Resolution on Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the

other has been the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity issued in 2001. A draft document based on this declaration is further passing through final stages of ratification at UNESCO. The particular enthusiasm that several countries and their leaders, especially President Chirac, have manifested toward this topic is most encouraging. President Chirac's profound remarks at the opening of the 31st session of UNESCO's General Conference in October 2001 stand out as an unforgettable document of this organization. Under the leadership of President Bouteflika, Algeria has been the first signatory to the resolution on cultural heritage, and this is the second time that we are both present at a UNESCO meeting on dialogue among civilizations. The first one was held in New York in the year 2000, where eleven other heads of state also attended.

UNESCO's commitment to ethical questions in science and bioethics also demonstrates that at the outset of the twenty first century the international community is seeking to fill the gap that was not sufficiently taken into consideration in past years.

Mr. Director-General,

Your decision to designate dialogue among civilizations as an inter-sectoral and strategic goal of UNESCO and taking it into account for considerations of strategic planning clearly indicates that this topic is at some level germane to all significant issues addressed by your organization.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The coincidence of the year 2001, the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, with the reprehensible catastrophe that occurred on September 11th of that year, and the political and other consequences that globally ensued, together with the interest shown by several think-tanks and research centers as well as international political bodies to the question of dialogue among civilizations should alert us to the urgency of this issue, not only as a matter of theoretical debate and practical academic consideration, but also in the fields of politics and economics.

I would like to announce here that, relying on the objectives stated in the constitution of UNESCO, I have decided to dedicate my time and efforts after my presidency tenure, to the pursuit of this highly important goal. I have already considered the idea of establishing a non-governmental organization that welcomes the support of dignitaries, intellectuals, reformers, as well as appropriate international organizations. I would, in particular, value suggestions from you, participants in this memorable gathering, and I would welcome your comments within the confines of available time during this visit. In my opinion we should pay particular attention to pathologies of "dialogue culture" at the outset.

Esteemed participants,

What is actually meant by calling cultures and civilizations to engage in a dialogue? Is it not the case that civilizations and cultures have already been engaged in a dialogue? Is there anything new in our call? It is likely that most of the participants here are familiar with Arnold Toynbee's parable that likened civilization to contagious disease. Generally, the diffusion of civilization from one geographical location to another is so obvious that it hardly needs any arguments to support it. This contagion or diffusion is an ancient phenomenon, as old as any form of human civilization known to us. Obviously one cannot lay any claim to novelty, at the dawn of the third millennium of the Common Era, for calling to a practice that has thousands of years of precedent even before the advent of our common dating convention. Therefore, I should draw your attention to the fact that dialogue among civilization, in the sense that I use it, is not simply a matter of "diffusion," "borrowing," or "influence" that occurs among civilizations.

"Influence" does not always take place within the realm of human consciousness or self-consciousness. Of course one could consciously try to influence or be conscious of one's being influenced, but the element of consciousness or self-consciousness need not always be present in the process. By contrast, it is impossible to conceive of dialogue in unconsciousness or a state of non-self-consciousness.

Should we recognize "will power" as characteristic of human existence, and note that will power follows human knowledge, we can infer that one of the most decisive questions about human existence has to deal with the nature of human self-knowledge and knowledge about the universe. Immanuel Kant formulated his three fundamental questions in this very same regard.

Human knowledge is expressed in linguistic form, and language, with words as its building blocks, is inherently a social institution and not just a private matter. Words carry their history, the history through which they have grown, been transformed and eventually evolved into their present form. Therefore, any discourse, even if it is not a verbatim reproduction of previous discourses and may detract from them, it still rises from their bosom and communicates with them, and it will soon join the current of old discourses that will continue to flow and renew into the future.

Since language is a social phenomenon, every discourse can only acquire "meaning" and become intellectually perceptible in reference to a set of other discourses. Although there may be no physiological difference in perceiving the sound of raindrops falling or of doves signing and hearing the voice of a fellow human being, from a humanistic point of view, the comparison is moot. The sound of falling raindrops is indeed cumulative but they lack "consonance." This is because that sound does not emanate from conscious social will. They do not

constitute a language. It is only in language that ontology, epistemology and history come together and form a unified whole. Human existence and human knowledge about self-existence and about the existence of others, in the present and in the past, is expressed in language: and the essence of language lies in its communicative capacity. It is only in communication, in dialogue, that self-knowledge and knowledge about others and about history and the universe at large may be attained.

Moreover, dialogue is an ethical act. By drawing special attention to this ethical aspect here, I wish to emphasize the non-utilitarian characteristic of ethical acts. Without due emphasis on this non-utilitarian characteristic, any utility-seeking act may easily be labeled as ethical as well.

To enter the realm of ethics is indeed to enter the realm of humanity. Utility can only be "good" as far as it does not come into conflict with truth, beauty and ethics. Once again we realize that one of the most beautiful voices that comes through is that of Plato, who expressed, at a high point in history, the unison of truth, beauty, and ethics, in the most philosophical language and yet with most poetical words. Dialogue is all at one and the same time, a matter of aesthetics, and ethics and it embodies the truth.

Dialogue among civilizations also takes alarm at the diminishing and declining familiarity of recent and upcoming generations with the sources from which thought, culture, poetry and beauty have sprung in our world. Indeed, what kind of life is it that is devoid of Buddhist smile, of Christian love, of Mosaic compassion for the oppressed, of Zoroastrian fire and water, and of the magnificence of Quranic expression? What a bleak life that is denuded of heavenly music of Pythagoras, of Platonic ideal forms, of Aristotelian logic, politics, and metaphysics, of Plotinus's all-pervasive insight, of the divine wisdom propounded by Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes; where Suhravardi's illuminationist intuition is absent, the sacred folly and unique wisdom of the Greeks is lacking; where there is no sign to be found of the stormy sea of Persian mystical poetry, or of the silken softness of Arabic lyrics, or of the whiteness of cherry blossoms and Japanese Hai Kus; where the beautiful and beauty-seeking heart of Ibn al-Arabi and Meister Eckhart, and the restless nights of the romanticists and the enlightened age of 18th century thinkers remain unknown. Indeed, without Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bergson, and without the perennial music of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, and more generally without paintings, music, sculpture, theater, poetry and other aesthetic products of human perceptiveness and culture what would life turn out to be like?

As a Muslim I believe that the beauty of religion derives from the beauty of justice, and not the other way round. It is justice that lies at the root of all

heavenly religions and therefore any interpretation of religion that results in injustice is contrary to the true teachings of religion. It should be the ideal of justice that sets the tone for religiosity not the other way round.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our true enemy that has come too close to us is ignorance of the history and culture of various civilizations. Dialogue among civilizations calls for augmenting the presence and role of cultural and ethical considerations in politics. We should recall that some observers have noticed that since the 18th century the world of politics has become increasingly more soulless and dull. When politics is rendered ancillary to economic scruples, it can no longer remain faithful to ethical virtues or to safeguarding human dignity: it can no longer watch out primarily for cultural and artistic heritage of humanity. Politics stripped of ethics and aesthetics can never accomplish much to protect human rights, no matter how much it may pretend to do so. Truth, beauty and ethics are bulwarks of human rights, and no human right can ever be defended by appeal to tyranny, untruth and unseemly contempt for dissenters. Let it be that intellectuals and artists take the lead in the journey to attain human rights, and let the politicians follow their lead.

The political characteristic of dialogue among civilization is that it adheres to the primacy of cultural and ethical concerns over political ones. In other words, it asserts that the understanding and practice of politics should be conducted under the aegis of cultural and ethical concerns. When politics merely follows the smell of oil instead of the scent of ethics, it may not defend human rights: rather it will only defend the rights of not humans but of wolves.

When it comes to politics, dialogue among civilizations would entail fundamental discussions of such concepts as democracy, justice and peace. By way of such discussions we may arrive at mutually acceptable definitions of these concepts, and only then we can avoid the pitfall of taking for granted self-interested interpretations that have simply constructed around the axis of power and dominance.

Allow me to say that I concur with the view expressed by the late German philosopher Georg Gadamer who, from a methodological as well as an epistemological perspective, maintained an essential difference between processes of dialogue and negotiation. In a dialogue, questions take priority over answers, and there is no insistence on silencing the opponent by way of aggrandizing the other party's shortcomings. On the other hand, this is normative in negotiations. In a dialogue we follow the process, but in negotiations we try to drag the process where we intend. In dialogue we remain open to change, whereas in negotiation the desire to prevail comes first.

Dear participants,

The resolution produced at the 31st General Conference of UNESCO which addresses the issue of terrorism is an important document that not only condemns this reprehensible and unjustifiable phenomenon in emphatic terms, but goes further to recommend an in-depth study of factors that lead to it. Dialogue as a form of communication in and of itself precludes aggression and terror. Aggression is uncommunicative and mute by its very nature, and as such is incapable of responding to any logic but that of brute force, and it leaves no room for mutual understanding. Proponents of aggression only seek to coerce others into seeing things the way they do, and forcing others to serve their interests, no matter how fundamentally their mutual interests may be contradictory. The result of this exclusionary procedure can only be the escalation of hatred and terrorism on the one side and war and carnage on the other. In addition to form, the content and substance of dialogue among civilizations also negates war and terrorism, and focuses instead on seeking remedies for a long list of ailments that afflict human society all over the globe: widespread poverty, and the shocking starvation of numerous children and adults, the horrendous destruction of the environment, the threatening of the fabric of family life, immorality, lack of education for the youth in poor regions, are among issues that would have to be put high on the list of our priorities to combat. Most similar concerns were on the minds of peace-loving statesmen who founded UNESCO.

In my recent visit to Africa, I came realize, more than before, the urgency of what in this organization is referred to as "Priority Africa." Especially in view of the inspiring fact that the civil society in this oppressed continent is positively progressing toward democracy and reform through avoidance of aggressive measures. These developments over the course of only fifteen years since my last visit to that continent are most striking. Similar indications of the same social ambitions are apparent in many other member states of UNESCO.

Dear friends,

At the end allow me to express my gratitude to the leaders of UNESCO and to renew our intense commitment, as member nations, to upholding and realizing the goals and ideals that define the existence philosophy of this organization.

Thank you